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Exile in Language

Abstract

Saint-John Perse's poem *Exil* (1941) represents a deep meditation on the nature of "writing" as subsequent critical theory has developed that term. Though the poem seems to present a "signature" at the end, it may be that the poet through giving in to a radically different signifying practice is in some sense not the signatory of the text. The archaic setting and difficult-to-resolve cultural matrix from this perspective become means of examining the co-originary origins of thought and language. Close analysis of textual patterns reveals a composition practice based on anagrammatic patterning. This kind of questioning of language in the practice of the text drives out all other characters and even the subjectivity of the presumed speaking subject. *Exil* is thus an exile in language that causes its readers to re-examine structures of interiority and exteriority on which identity and culture are based.

Keywords

Saint-John Perse, *Exil*, nature of writing, critical theory, poetry, sign, thought, language, anagrammatic patterning, interiority, exteriority, identity, culture

Exile In Language

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Saint-John Perse made his return to poetry in 1941 when he wrote *Exil*, following his own personal exile from France. In many ways, the poem is central to his overall poetic *oeuvre*, recapitulating the themes of his earlier work as well as echoing specific language (Raybaud 1982). The poem also anticipates the rich thematics of the elements that will serve to structure his later long poems (e.g. *Vents*, *Amers*, *Chronique*). Recent critical work has centered on the idea of the “signature”—and with that a certain poetic “identity”—the poem seems to present, especially in the final declaration: “Et c’est l’heure, ô Poète, décliner ton nom, ta naissance, et ta race. . . .” (“And the time is come, O Poet, to declare your name, your birth, and your race. . . .” Perse 1972, 137; trans. Denis Devlin, in Perse 1983, 171).¹ But this “signature” carries a double edge, even without considering the problem of the pseudonym, Saint-John Perse (Perse’s real name was Alexis Leger). As Steven Winspur has remarked: “The section entitled *Exile* does not end on a name, a birth or a race but on the silence of the three final ellipsis marks” (50, my trans.). The question of denomination and identity is paradigmatic of the larger structure of *Exil*, for the poem represents Perse’s deepest meditation on poetry itself and “writing,” as subsequent critical theory has developed that term.² In fact, this questioning so thoroughly structures the text as to drive out any other “characters” or even the subjectivity of the presumed speaking subject. *Exil* is an exile in language that undermines the distinctions of interiority and exteriority on which traditional notions of the subject are based.

The play of the speaking subject, the one who says “I” in the poem, is extremely complicated, with some or most of Chants II, III, V, VI, and VII enclosed in quotation marks. The speaker in these “enclosed” or “spoken” passages seems at once the “same” and

“different” from the speaker in the rest of the poem. Unlike Perse’s previous poem, *Anabase* (1924; 1972 91–117; 1983 99–143), where a truly dialogic structure emerges, or his later antiphonal use of speeches by a pair of lovers in *Amers* (1957; 1972 253–385; 1983 359–573), the use of enclosed speeches here seems to reflect a profound meditation on poetic subjectivity itself. As Antoine Raybaud has pointed out, the one who speaks in these passages is given an uncertain status through the use of “changing qualifications” such as “Proscrit (Outlaw),” “Prodigue” (Prodigal One), “Etranger” (Stranger), “Cavalier” (Horseman) or others even more “enigmatic” or “undecided” (95). The “I” who speaks is either not named or referred to in such terms that an impersonality haunts or intrudes on the identity of the speaking subject.³ This impersonality that haunts or intrudes on the speaking subject can be compared to the impersonality that Maurice Blanchot identifies as a constituent of “l’espace littéraire,” literary space, or writing. As he says:

What he has to write delivers the one who has to write to an affirmation over which he has no authority, which is itself without substance, which affirms nothing, and yet is not repose, not the dignity of silence, for it is what still speaks when everything has been said. The affirmation doesn’t precede speech, because it prevents speech from beginning, just as it takes away from language the right and the power to interrupt itself. (1955, 16–17; 1982, 26)

The problematics of the proper name are thus but one aspect of a thoroughgoing inquiry into the questions of identity and writing. Exile, for Perse, is not simply wandering: “Et ce n’est point errer, ô Pérégrin” (“And it is not at all to wander, Pilgrim” II, 3; my trans.). Exile is a movement of force and change activated on the textual level through (or in) language whereby the poet gives up his identity rather than finds it.

“Writing” itself and not naming or identity is the central project of Perse’s *Exil* and the text is replete with signs of difficulty and danger to the identity of the speaker. Further on in Chant II, the speaker states:

J’ai fondé sur l’abîme et l’embrun et la fumée des sables. Je me
coucherai dans les citernes et dans les vaisseaux creux.

I have built upon the abyss and the spindrift and the sandsmoke. I shall lie down in cistern and hollow vessel. (6)

What kind of foundation can be established “above the abyss” or “spindrift” or “smoke of sands”? Clearly only a foundation that is perpetually changing and as close as possible to non-existence. Yet it is the hollow or nothingness of the vessel that gives it utility, even a special kind of “Being” in Heidegger’s analysis (Heidegger 1971, 167–72; cf. Taylor 1987, 83–85). So the “cistern” and the “hollow vessel” in which the speaker seeks rest are likewise useful for their sheltering emptiness.

“Writing” and images taken from nature interpenetrate in *Exil*, in what one critic has termed “the semiotics of the natural world” (Geninasca 221). In this Chant the interpenetration is effected through a deliberate archaizing of the theme of reading nature through augury:

Comme le Cavalier, la corde au point, à l’entrée du désert,
J’épie au cirque le plus vaste l’élancement des signes les plus
fastes.

Et le matin pour nous mène son doigt d’augure parmi de
saintes écritures.

L’exil n’est point d’hier! l’exil n’est point d’hier! “ô vestiges,
ô prémisses,”

Dit l’Étranger parmi les sables, “toute chose au monde
m’est nouvelle! . . .” Et la naissance de son chant ne lui est pas
moins étrangère.

Like the Rider, lariat in hand, at the gate of the desert,
I watch in this vast arena signs of good omen soaring.
And morning, for our sake, moves her prophetic finger
through sacred writings.

Exile is not of yesterday! exile is not of yesterday! . . . “O
vestiges, O premises,”

Says the Stranger on the sands, “the whole world is new to
me. . . .” And the birth of his song is no less alien to him. (II, 17–
21)

A rich thematics of margins, borders, and being a “stranger” runs through this sequence, and—as much as the specific words

"Cavalier" and "desert"—serves to link this poem to *Anabase*. "Writing" is also thematized, as such, in this strange play of inside and outside. The speaker, *like* a "Cavalier," looks into this arena from the outside to see the release of "signs of good omen." Now these signs are presumably a natural product, animal entrails, or such. The "morning," in a strange personification, leads her "finger of augury through the holy scriptures." These scriptures are presumably either texts used for interpreting the auguries or sacred texts of a related religious practice, but then again what is the status of the scene described—is it "present" or "absent"? The interjection that follows would seem to be a rebuke (of the speaker to himself?) for situating "exile" in the past instead of the present. The Stranger speaks in a phrase that recalls Rimbaud's "ô saisons, ô châteaux" ("O seasons, O great houses"), but in a strange register that unites past and future: *vestiges* and *premisses* (Rimbaud 179–80).⁴ The future that seems to be announced is the future of the poem, "the birth of his song," but in terms that recall Blanchot's insistence on the solitude of the writerly activity and the impersonality of the text. The Stranger is not only an outsider, but the poem's creation is itself, to him, "no less strange."

Passages such as this one and others in *Exil* point to Saint-John Perse as the great poet of "pure" or "radical exteriority," in Blanchot's terms (Taylor 1987, 235). As Taylor states: "This exteriority makes it possible to distinguish interior and exterior: this outside differentiates inside and outside" (1987, 235). So Perse's "return" to poetry is an "ex-centering" of his poetic subjectivity. As Blanchot states:

The "re" of the return inscribes the "ex," opening of all exteriority: as if the return, far from putting an end to it, marks exile, the commencement in its recommencement of exodus. To return, that would be to return again to ex-centering oneself, to erring. Only the *nomadic* affirmation remains. (1973, 49; trans. Taylor 1987, 239)⁵

This suggestive passage by Blanchot begins to place some of the paradoxical elements in Perse's thematics in perspective. The poet who would write "exile" must be the poet willing to forego a certain unitary perspective. To give up the consistency of the path—to give in to erring—is not the same as to give up any possible goal. Thus, in

Exil, Perse insists that this exile is not simply wandering, but rather a nomadic expedition or Pilgrimage.

The “journey to the interior” that structures *Anabase* is mirrored in this poem by a journey along the coast: “Je reprendrai ma course de Numide, longeant la mer inaliénable” (“I shall resume my Numidian flight, skirting the inalienable sea” VII, 10). The Numidians of course were an ancient people in a region of North Africa. The quest or pilgrimage aspect of the poem is stated even more forcefully when the speaker says: “Plaise au sage d’épier la naissance des schismes! . . . Le ciel est un Sahel où va l’azalaïe en quête de sel gemme” (“Well may the sage spy out the birth of schisms! . . . The sky is a Sahel desert where the holy caravan goes in search of rocksalt” V, 11). As the speaker “spied” into the arena to see the auguries, here the wise man spies into the heavens. The image that follows links up with the image of the speaker as a Numidian with the reference to the Sahel. The quest or journey itself is the *azalaïe*, a word for which Perse apologized when he sent the poem to Archibald MacLeish (to whom it is dedicated):

Among the concrete words of the poem there is a single rare or exotic word, for which I apologize—*azalaïe*, which you won’t find in the standard dictionaries, is the name given to the great annual salt caravan in the African deserts. I needed the word for a transposition. (1972, 548; 1979, 448)

The transposition of which Perse speaks in this letter is probably not the transposition of letters or anagram (to which I will be turning shortly).⁶ Rather, Perse deliberately seeks a transposition in time to a remote, archaic past.

One could argue that Perse’s motivation for seeking to ground his exploration of the theme of exile and erring in such a remote setting is a search for origins, a way of thinking about Being which has been “forgotten” in the course of Western history, literature, and philosophy. This is, of course, the thinking Heidegger pursues:

Being sets [beings] adrift in errancy [*Irre*]. Beings come to pass in that errancy by which they circumvent Being and establish the realm of error [*Irrtum*] (in the sense of the prince’s realm or the realm of poetry). Error is the space in which history unfolds. . . .

Without errancy there would be no connection from destiny to destiny: there would be no history. (1975, 27; Taylor 1987, 52)

My claim here is not that Perse follows Heidegger, or even that his project carries the philosophical seriousness of Heidegger's inquiry. This kind of comparison can serve however to uncover Perse's attraction to, even his need for, the kind of transposition in space and history that he achieves in this poem. Perse's intuitive (say, as opposed to philosophically studied or motivated) move to archaic times allows his poetry a richness of reflection in which the Being of beings is intimately tied to a quest for thinking in poetic images. This quest is one with the speaker's song, called forth from him as though by a mysterious outside force.

The forces that traverse the poem and motivate its image clusters are thus fundamentally linked with the force of poetry or writing itself, as a clamor which arises uncontrollably and indistinguishably from the forces of nature. The "enclosed" speaker proclaims:

"... Toujours il y eut cette clameur, toujours il y eut cette grandeur,

"Cette chose errante par le monde, cette haute transe par le monde, et sur toutes grèves de ce monde, du même souffle proférée, la même vague proférant

"Une seule et longue phrase sans césure à jamais intelligible..."

"... There has always been this clamour, there has always been this grandeur,

This thing wandering about the world, this high trance about the world, and on all the shores of the world, by the same breath uttered, the same wave uttering

One long phrase without pause forever unintelligible..."
(III, 4-6)

And if the word, or message, of this "enclosed" speaker were all we had, we might be able to discern a philosophy or even an ontotheology of the *Logos*, in which the "word" of the speaker stems from, even mirrors, reflects, the "Word" of an ultimate Creator. Yet, it is clear that this philosophy of the *Logos* resides in or creates a space of identity, which the present text menaces at every juncture. Following

the end of this proclamation by the “enclosed” speaker, the non-enclosed speaker says bluntly:

Je vous connais, ô monstre! Nous voici de nouveau face à face.
Nous reprenons ce long débat où nous l'avions laissé.

I know you, monster! Once more face to face. We take up the long debate where we left off. (III, 10; trans. modified)

Here the “reticent” poet-speaker seems to be reproaching the “declamatory” poet-speaker (though, as in the passage examined earlier, whether the address represents two separate figures or aspects of the same speaker is ultimately unresolvable). Further on the non-enclosed or “reticent” speaker says:

Que voulez-vous encore de moi, ô souffle original? Et vous, que pensez-vous encore tirer de ma lèvre vivante,

What more do you want of me, O breath of origin? And you, what more would you drag from my living lips, (III, 13)

Taylor has shown well the connections between monstrosity and other images of the labyrinth, marginality and erring (1984, 9, 61, 71; 1987, 117, 176, 244). In juxtaposing these two versets, the conflict between a “breath of origin” and an unwilling or reticent speaker is figured forth in images of monstrosity and liminality. Once again, the song, or present poem, seems to be forced on the speaker from *outside*. The image the speaker gives for his song being forced on him is another marginal or liminal one, “my living lips.”

In the central Chant IV of *Exil*, the scene of “writing” takes on a dizzying array of figures and images. Among them we find the speaker saying:

Et qui donc était là qui s'en fut sur son aile? Et qui donc, cette nuit, a sur ma lèvre d'étranger pris encore malgré moi l'usage de ce chant?

And who was it there that flew away? And so who was it that night, who, against my will, stole from my stranger's lips the practice of this song? (10)

Aile (wing) is a repeated word in *Exil* (III, 8; IV, 2, 17, 20; VII, 2, 9), as is *lèvre* (lip) (III, 2, 13; IV, 10; V, 2; VII, 10). *Aile* is a near anagram of *exil*—but Perse’s favorite substitution is *aile/aire* (II, III, VII; Raybaud, 106–107). Homonyms for *aile* include *elle* (she) and *L*; for *aire* (shelter), *air* (air) and *erre* (wander). Semantically, *aire* as “shelter” or “nesting place” is directly opposed to *erre* and *exil*. *Lèvre* (lip) might then be seen as liminal anagrammatically as well as semantically.

If we turn to the text of *Exil*, Chant IV, through close analysis of its anagrammatic deep structure we shall see how the textual apparatus, the words of its “writing,” do indeed construct the text. In his analysis of *Exil* as “signature,” Raybaud states:

From which perhaps the strange signature of *Exil*: less maybe the announcement of a future poem which could not be this one, than the poem as signature or signatory, in as far as the poet is in effect, and of necessity, given as much as giver, and produced by the play of the poem, more than its instigator or organizer. (96; my trans.)

What would it mean for the poet to be produced by the poem rather than the poem by the poet? We might recall Blanchot’s analysis of the impersonality of writing, through which the writer in the act of writing gives up rather than establishes control over the text. Perhaps more radically still, might this strange reversibility point to a reversal of interiority and exteriority at the innermost place of the production of the text, the practice of composition itself?

In his brief essay, “General Aims and Theories,” Hart Crane develops his conception of the “logic of metaphor” with reference to specific images from his poems (217–23).⁸ Besides the famous example of “adagios of islands” from “Voyages,” he also analyzes an image from “For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen”:

Similarly in “Faustus and Helen” (III) the speed and tense altitude of an aeroplane are much better suggested by the idea of “nimble blue plateaus”—*implying* the aeroplane and its speed against a contrast of stationary elevated earth. Although the statement is pseudo in relation to formal logic—it *is* completely logical in relation to the truth of the imagination, and there is

expressed a concept of speed and space that could not be handled so well in other terms. (221–22)

Now if it were not for more “concrete” image sequences in the same poem (e.g. “In corymbulous formations of mechanics,” 32), I doubt whether many readers would see in “nimble blue plateaus” all that Crane would wish (an airplane juxtaposed with the stationary elevated earth). Even with those other images, this particular passage of the poem is nearly impenetrable. Here we approach the heart of the matter—to what extent *does* the poet control meaning; is *vouloir-dire* (intending to say) the same as *ecrire* (writing)?

In the middle of Chant IV of *Exil* there is a verset which bears a glancing similarity to the image of the airplane which Crane analyzes in his own poem. The speaker says:

De beaux fragments d'histoires en dérive sur des pales d'hélices,
dans le ciel plein d'erreurs et d'errantes prémisses, se mire à virer
pour le délice du scoliaste.

Fragments of beautiful stories adrift in spirals [*lit.* propellor blades], in the sky full of errors and erring premises, went turning around to the scholiast's delight. (IV, 9)

Here the translator has already “metaphorized” one of Perse's “concrete expressions”—*pales d'hélices* (propellor blades). For all of his archaizing tendencies in setting and imagery, Perse in fact does not depart very far from the language of his day. In the verset in question, the connection is roughly the same as “le ciel comme un Sahel” (the sky like a Sahel desert) or any of the many quick associations whereby one image is suddenly juxtaposed with another. The question that remains to be posed is whether Perse could have wished his readers to decipher the “sense,” the “meaning,” his *vouloir-dire*, in the same manner as Crane apparently did. Or, put more simply still, what are those *pales d'hélices* (propellor blades) doing there in the poem?

A close look at the texture of the verset in question shows, I think, that the underlying “motivation” for the sign in question is not conceptual logic or even the logic of metaphor, but the logic of anagram. Consider the following anagrammatic patterns: *d'histoires/dérive / d'hélices / d'erreurs / d'errantes / délice; dérive / d'hélices /*

prémisses/se mirent/virer, histoire/scoliaсте (all words from above passage). While we *scoliastes* are scurrying to gloss our texts, the words themselves are forming dizzying helices that mount as on wings (or propeller blades) to the skies. Such anagrammatic patterns can hardly be accidental. In fact, closer examination of manuscript evidence (which is slowly becoming possible due to the publication of annotated facsimile editions) shows that for key words in passages such as the foregoing *Perse* would make extensive word lists in the margins or even right over the word itself in the place where it occurs in the manuscript (Henry 1979, 1983, 1985). Although anterior versions or *brouillons* are lacking, it is possible to speculate that such word lists were not final touches to the poem, but in some sense formed the initial structure for the poem itself (Roger Little, 1973, 112).

Concentrating on such possibilities of composition practice allows us a view of the ending of Chant IV that is anything but metaphysical:

Et les poèmes nés d'hier, ah! les poèmes nés un soir à la fourche
de l'éclair, il en est comme de la cendre au lait des femmes, trace
infime . . .

Et de toute chose ailée dont vous n'avez usage, me com-
posant un pur langage sans office,

Voici que j'ai dessein encore d'un grand poème délébile . . .

And the poems born yesterday, ah! the poems born one
evening in the lightning's fork, what's left of them is, like ash in
women's milk, but the faintest trace . . .

And I, from all winged things for which you have no use,
composing a language free of usage and pure,

Now I have once more the design for a great, delible
poem. . . . (18–20)

Rather than “read” these versets for their sense, I want to choose the two words that seem to organize not just the passage, but the whole Chant (and maybe the whole poem). *Dessein*: “It. ‘disegno’ *Liter.* Idée que l’on forme d’exécuter qqch.” (From the Italian, *disegno*, literary, the idea one has of undertaking something, *Robert*). But if we look again, we see: (*V.*) *dessin*: “var. *dessein* jusqu’au XVIIIe,” Latin

designare, from *signum*, sign. We have two words, one which means mental conception or intention to do something, the other a physical sketch or outline—but originally they were one word, and they both stem from the Latin for “sign.” The other word is simpler, because rare: *Délébile*: “Lat. *delebilis* de *delere* ‘détruire,’ Rare. Qui peut s’effacer” (Latin for “to destroy,” Rare. Which can be erased, Robert). The syntax of the sentence separates these two words: “Look and see that I once again have the *design* (intention) for a great poem (that will be) *delible*.” The sense seems to say: the poet has a mental conception for a project; that project will be an erasable poem. The anagrammatic logic is *other*.

Following the anagrammatic pair *dessein/délébile* through Chant IV, verset by verset, we discover the following anagrammatic pattern: *labiles/d’exil/déclinent* (labile/of exile/sink, 3); *Sibylles* (Sibyls, 4); *d’histoires/dérive/d’hélices/d’erreurs/délice* (see above, 9); *scribe/style* (scribe/style or stylus, 11); *des signes illicites* (illicit signs, 13); *cilice du sel* (hairshirt of salt, 14); *nautille/mobile* (nautilus/mobile, 15); *l’aile fossile* (the fossil wing, 16); *débris* (17); *d’hier/l’éclair* (yesterday/lightning, 18); *ailée* (winged, 19). More than just sound patterning as a pleasing embellishment to the poetic text, such an underlying pattern supports the supposition that Perse may have constructed Chant IV (and even all his poetry) on such an underlying pattern or structure of words. Beginning with these shifting anagrams as “marks” of sorts (*amer*, VI, 2—mark used in navigation along a shoreline), the poet may well have strung his versets along them, stretching the texture of his linguistic fabric over such a plan or pattern. A textual strategy like this would allow the poet leeway to explore vastly different semantic registers, even mixing semantic registers in the same passage, while using an underlying sound patterning and pattern of near-repetition as his basic organizing principle. Thus the *dessein* or underlying intention of such a poetic project is necessarily something that the poet works out in the text rather than holding in his mind some image of the ideal completed work. Such a design is also *délébile* or erasable in that once it has been integrated into the overall weave of the poetic text, it is discernible only through extreme attention and, even then, always, as it were, slips away.

For the most part, in Chant IV, the anagrammatic patterns connect up with a certain thematizing of the notion of the “erasable” poem. Early on the speaker says:

A l'heure où les constellations labiles qui changent de vocable pour les hommes d'exil déclinent dans les sables à la recherche d'un lieu pur?

At that *hour* when the *lapsing* constellations, whose *language* [*lit.* a word or term; especially, a word regarded as a unit of sound or letters rather than as a unit of meaning, *Webster's New World*] changes for the men of *exile*, *sink* into the *sands* in search of a *place of purity?* (3, my italics)

In this verset the words already highlighted in the overall anagrammatic pattern are also linked up with *l'heure/lieu pur* and *vocable/sables*. *Labile* is a somewhat rare word that means subject to falling. In the phrase *constellations labiles*, this can only refer on a literal level to shooting stars. The image links up with "Les spasmes de l'éclair sont pour le ravissement des Princes en Tauride" ("The spasms of lightning are the delight of Princes in Taurida," I, 7), which ends the first Chant, as well as "Syntaxe de l'éclair!" ("Syntax of lightning!" VII, 1) and "L'éclair m'ouvre le lit de plus vastes desseins" ("Lightning lays bare to me the bed of immense designs" VII, 11), from the final Chant. Also, towards the end of Chant IV, we find as part of the pattern identified above, "les poèmes nés un soir à la fourche de l'éclair" ("the poems born one evening in the lightning's fork"). Lightning, constellations, sudden flashes of insight, patterns traced in the sky (sand—all of these link up with the theme of the erasable poem. *Labile* also is a near homonym of *labial*, relating to the lips (*lèvres*), and uncovering a register of descriptive grammar or linguistics, as in *vocable* and *déclinent*.

Writing as such is thematized most evidently in versets 4, 11 and 12–14. As we might suspect, these versets have close anagrammatic links that fit the *dessein/délébile* pattern. In verset 4, we see a return to the archaic setting identified previously in Chants II and V. Here the speaker says:

Partout-errante fut son nom de courtisane chez les prêtres, aux grottes vertes des *Sibylles*, et le matin sur notre seuil sut effacer les traces de pieds nus, parmi de saintes écritures . . .

World-wanderer was her courtesan's name among the priests, in the *Sibyls'* green caves, and morning knew how to erase the

tracks of naked feet from our sill, among sacred writings. . . . (4)

The rich thematics of writing, divinatory practice and sacred scripture causes this passage to carry multiple resonances. The anagrammatic link from *Sibylles* to *dessein/délébile*, in the perspective we have been developing, seems like a strong motivating force for the logic of the image sequences. Writing as an easily erasable trace, like tracks in the sand, is linked to the divine mysteries through the connotations of *Sibylles* and *saintes écritures* (sacred writings). Further on we find the speaker saying:

*Renverse, ô scribe, sur la table des grèves, du revers de ton style
la cire empreinte du mot vain.*

*Turn over with your stylus, on the table of the shores, O Scribe,
the wax impressed with your empty statement. (11)*

Again, in addition to the *scribe/style/Sibylle/délébile* pattern, there is another pattern, *Renverse/vain/grèves/revers*, that organizes this particular verset. The *style* is here the “stylus,” a cutting instrument used for writing on wax tablets (cf. Taylor 1987). In this verset the action is that of reversing the tablet to erase the sign, using the other end of the stylus, the “eraser” end.

Writing, erasing and sacred divinatory practice are evident in the anagrammatically patterned versets 13–14 as well:

*Et c'est l'heure, ô Mendiante, où sur la face close des grands
miroirs de pierre exposés dans les antres*

*L'officiant chaussé de feutre et ganté de soie grège efface, à
grand renfort de manches, l'affleurement des signes illicites de la
nuit.*

*And it is the hour, O Beggarwoman, when on the shut faces
of great stone mirrors exposed in the caves*

*The celebrant, shod in felt and gloved in raw silk, with a
great sweep of his sleeve wipes away the illicit signs of night.*

This passage returns strongly to the archaizing of image examined above and in its strange unresolvable movement is certainly one of the strongest confrontations with alterity in the poem. *L'officiant* (the

celebrant) links up with the *prêtres* (priests) in the cave of the Sibyls (4) and the penultimate verset, “un pur langage sans office” (a language free of usage and pure). Here the “celebrant” seems to be in the process of “effacing” the “illicit signs” produced during the night “on giant stone mirrors in the caves” (cf. Cook 1986). The mind is nearly overwhelmed by the associative possibilities presented by this highly charged passage. What are the “illicit signs”? Why are they illicit? Why must they be “effaced”? Is the night and cave setting associated with sexuality, with divinatory practice, or somehow with both? While these questions may be finally unanswerable, the anagrammatic link with *dessein/délébile* certainly helps to line up some of the possibilities. *Dessein* connects with *des signes illicites*, both anagrammatically and, in the strictest sense, etymologically (see above). *Délébile* connects with the verb *effacer* (erase) semantically, as the latter serves to define the former. In some sense then, this scene refigures the entire drama of the poem in an unimaginably archaic past—the scene of “writing” as a search for “origins.”

This close analysis of the anagrammatic structuring of Chant IV of *Exil* reveals that Perse’s textual practice is indeed *other* than the traditional Western metaphysics of design and intention. More than most other poets to this day, Perse gave in to a signifying process that was radically altering. Following the analysis by Blanchot and Taylor of exteriority, we can say that Perse in *Exil* figures forth an exteriority that is “pure” or “radical” in the sense that it precedes traditional inner/outer distinctions by destroying the presumed interiority of the speaking subject. That Perse places his image sequences in an unimaginably archaic past seems from this perspective to be due to a genuine inquiry into the co-originary origins of thought and poetic image. In his composition practice Perse created images that activate *in language* unheard-of, strange, prodigious and ex-centering forces. In doing so he discovered, as do we his readers in following his erring trace, *le pur mobile de nos songes* (the pure mobile of our dreams, IV, 15, my trans.).

NOTES

1. Further references to the text of *Exil* in the text are to these two editions (and, except where noted, the published translation). Roman numerals shall refer to individual sections, or *Chants*, arabic numerals to individual *versets*.

2. Most importantly in the work of Jacques Derrida (e.g., 1967). There he argues that the *Bedeutung* or *vouloir-dire* (meaning) that underlies Husserlian intentionality is based on a privileging of speech as absolute self-presence. "Writing" as a category which precedes such a speech/writing dyad is thus the non-originary "foundation" of any possibility of thinking or speaking.
3. The philosophical implications of this search for the "proper" name are explored well by Mark C. Taylor (1984). He states, for example, "Possession of a proper name is not only the aim of sojourning subjects; it is also the goal of Western philosophy and theology" (41).
4. According to Yves Bonnefoy, this phrase of Rimbaud is not an achieved ideal vision, but rather reveals an inescapable *flaw*: "On this side, of course, from the hoped-for great houses and seasons (the true place and the true time of a life founded on the absolute) this resignation is only the inherent flaw in every human soul" (81; my trans.). It should be noted that Rimbaud is one of the few poets from the French tradition to whom Perse refers in positive terms.
5. Taylor elsewhere states: "The inscription of the subject within this tissue of relations results in the collapse of the absolute opposition between interiority and exteriority. If the subject is not self-centered but is a cipher for forces that play through it, there can be no sharp opposition between inwardness and outwardness. What appears to be merely outward is actually inward, and what appears to be exclusively inward is at the same time outward. This interplay of inwardness and outwardness subverts purely private and personal subjectivity" (1984, 136).
6. The classic source for investigating Perse's play with the materiality of language is Roger Cailliois (1954). Here we might simply notice the anagrammatic series: *ciel/Sahel/azalaïe/sel*. Cailliois would call this a form of "substitution."
7. The reader may recall that Isaiah cries out in a similar fashion when he has his "face-to-face" encounter with God: "Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts" (Isaiah 6:5).
8. It is interesting to compare Crane's phrase "logic of metaphor" with T. S. Eliot's terms "logic of the imagination" and "logic of imagery" which he uses in the preface to his translation of Perse's *Anabase* in order to describe Perse's poetic practice (Eliot 1931; Perse 1983, 709-12).

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